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Interviews: holding a formal conversation

Every manager holds interviews. To be able to hold a structured interview with someone to achieve a clear goal is a fundamental managerial skill.

When is an interview not an interview?

The word 'interview' simply means 'looking between us': an interview is an exchange of views. Any conversation – conducted well – is such an exchange. Interviews differ from other conversations in that they:

- **are held for a very specific reason;**
- **aim at a particular outcome;**
- **are more carefully and consciously structured;**
- **must usually cover predetermined matters of concern;**
- **are called and led by one person – the interviewer;**
- **are usually recorded.**

This chapter will look at the following four types of interview:

- **appraisal;**
- **delegation;**
- **coaching;**
- **counselling.**

Each type of interview will demand a range of skills from you, the interviewer. All of the skills of enquiry and persuasion that have been explored so far in this book will come into play at some point.

Preparing for the interview

Prepare for the interview by considering three questions:

- **What's my objective?**
- **What do I need?**
- **When and where?**

What's my objective?

What do you want to achieve in the interview? You must decide, for you are calling the interview. Do you want to discipline a member of staff for risking an accident, or influence their attitude to safety? Are you trying to offload a boring routine task or seeking to delegate as a way of developing a member of your team? Are you counselling or coaching?

Setting a clear objective is the only way you will be able to measure the interview's success. And it is essential if you want to be able to decide on the style and structure of the interview.

What do I need?

Think about the information you will need before and during the

interview. Think also about what information the interviewee will need. What are the key areas you need to cover? In what order? What questions do you need to ask?

You may also need other kinds of equipment to help you: notepads, flip charts, files, samples of material or machinery. You may even need a witness to ensure that the interview is seen to be conducted professionally and fairly.

When and where?

When do you propose to interview? For how long? The time of day is as important as the day you choose. Certain times of day are notoriously difficult for interview: after lunch, for example – or during lunch! Remember also that an interview that goes on too long will become counterproductive.

The quality of the interview will be strongly influenced by its venue. You may decide that your office is too formal or intimidating; on the other hand, interviewing in a crowded public area or in the pub can destroy the sense of privacy that any interview should encourage. You may decide to conduct some parts of an interview in different places.

Think also about the climate you set up for the interviewee. Sitting them on a low chair, beyond a desk, facing a sunny window, with nowhere to put a cup of coffee, will obviously set up an unpleasant atmosphere.

Structuring the interview

Interviews, like other conversations, naturally fall into a structure. Interviewers sometimes try to press an interview forward towards a result without allowing enough time for the early stages.

Every interview can be structured using the WASP structure that was examined in Chapter 3. This structure reinforces the fact that both stages of thinking are important.

- **Welcome (first-stage thinking).** At the start of the interview, state your objective, set the scene and establish your relationship. ‘Why are we talking about this matter? Why us?’ Do whatever you can to help the interviewee relax. Make sure the interviewee understands the rules you are establishing, and agrees to them.
- **Acquire (first-stage thinking).** The second step is information gathering. Concentrate on finding out as much as possible about the matter, as the interviewee sees it. Your task is to listen. Ask questions only to keep the interview on course or to encourage the interviewee further down a useful road. Take care not to judge or imply that you are making any decision.
- **Supply (second-stage thinking).** Now, at the third step, the interview has moved on from information gathering to joint problem solving. Review options for action. It’s important at this stage of the interview to remind yourselves of the objective that you set at the start.
- **Part (second-stage thinking).** Finally, make a decision. You and the interviewee work out what you have agreed. State explicitly the interview’s outcome: the action that will result from it. The essence of the parting stage is that you explicitly agree what is going to happen next. What is going to happen? Who will do it? Is there a deadline? Who is going to check on progress?

What about after the interview? In many cases, you may need time to put your thoughts in order and make decisions. Indeed, it might be entirely inappropriate to decide – or to tell the interviewee what you have decided – at the end of the interview itself. The interviewee, too, may need time to reflect on the interview. Nevertheless, you must tell the interviewee what you expect the next step to be and make sure that they agree to it.

After the interview

- **Make your notes immediately.** There's no general rule about whether to take notes during the interview, except that note-taking should not interfere with listening to the interviewee unduly.
- **Carry out any actions you have agreed** and follow up on actions agreed by the interviewee.
- **Review your own performance as an interviewer.** What went well? What could have been better? Above all, did you achieve the objective you set yourself? A few moments reviewing your own performance can certainly help you in later interviews.

Types of interview

These are a selection of the most common interviews you will hold as a manager. Every interview is analysed in terms of the four-stage WASP structure. Whatever kind of interview you are holding, use all the skills of enquiry that we have explored in Chapter 4:

- **paying attention;**
- **treating the interviewee as an equal;**
- **cultivating ease;**
- **encouraging;**
- **asking quality questions;**
- **rationing information;**
- **giving positive feedback.**

Appraisal

An appraisal interview is one of the most important you hold as a manager. It's vital that both you and the jobholder prepare thoroughly for the interview.

Preparing for the interview

You should study the jobholder's job description and the standards of performance that you have set up. If targets have been set and regularly reviewed, think about these with care. The key questions to ask at this stage are:

- **What results has the jobholder achieved?**
- **Where has the jobholder exceeded expectations or shown real progress?**
- **Which results have not been achieved? Can you suggest why?**

Make sure that you tell the jobholder what you are doing to prepare and invite them to prepare in a similar way. Ask them, well in advance, to consider their own performance over the appraised period, and to note successes, failures and anything in between!

The essence of a successful appraisal is the comparison of the two sets of ideas: yours and the jobholder's. You are aiming for shared understanding: an agreement about the jobholder's performance and potential for the future.

Holding the interview

Don't kill the appraisal off at an early stage by descending into adversarial conversation. Be ready with the Ladder of Inference (see Chapter 3) to take any potential controversy into a more careful examination of facts and feelings.

Welcome

Review standards, targets, the job description and any other

aspects of performance that you have both looked at. Relate them: take comparisons and talk about what's been achieved, and what has not happened. Stick to the known facts and make sure that you agree them.

Your questions to the jobholder might include:

- **How do you feel your job has been going since we last spoke?**
- **What do you feel you do best?**
- **Where do you have real problems?**
- **How relevant is the job description?**

Acquire

Open up the interview by asking the jobholder for their views and withholding your own. Review the possible reasons for achievement or lack of it. Open up the interview to include matters of competency, skills, training and external circumstances.

Questions at this stage might include:

- **What are your strong points?**
- **Where do you think you could develop?**
- **What particular problems have you had? How do you think you could have handled them differently?**

Look for possibilities rather than uttering closed judgements. Instead of saying, for example, 'You're aggressive with our customers', you might say 'Some of our customers seem to perceive your behaviour as aggressive. What do you think about that?' Use behaviour as the basis for your comments. Have evidence to hand. Be ready to reinterpret the evidence from the jobholder's point of view.

Supply

This is the problem-solving part of the interview. Analyse what you have found, and focus on opportunities for action,

change and improvement. Generate alternatives. Seek agreement on what could be done. You might be looking for new moves towards targets, performance standards or even amendments to the job description.

Questions at this stage include:

- **What might we do to alter our targets or standards?**
- **Do we need to rewrite any part of the job description?**
- **How could the job be improved? Have you any ideas?**

Part

You and the jobholder confirm your agreement and part on the clear understanding that these actions are recorded and will be monitored.

Look back at the essential elements of a conversation for action in Chapter 3. Remember that you will gain more commitment from the jobholder if you make requests and invite them to give a considered response.

Don't complete any forms during the interview. It will take too long and distract you from your real business. Take time to fill out any paperwork carefully, after the interview has ended. You need time to assemble your thoughts and summarise them in your mind. You should, of course, at least show any completed paperwork to the jobholder and involve them in any changes.

You must make sure that you carry out any actions that you agree to in the interview: support, procedural changes, delegation or training. If you do not, you undermine both your own authority and the credibility of the appraisal process itself. And you will find it harder next time to generate the respect and trust that form the basis of the whole system.

Handling poor performance

You will sometimes have to handle poor performance. Anyone can perform under par at times. Usually some underachieving can be tolerated, but persistent or serious

shortfalls need action. Avoiding the issue will not make it go away.

What you may see as poor performance is not necessarily the jobholder's fault. In fact, it's unrewarding to think in terms of blame or fault if you detect poor performance. Of course, it may be a genuine case of misconduct; but the circumstances of poor performance are likely to be more complex. An effective manager will look deeper and not jump to conclusions.

First, establish the gap. What is the standard that isn't being met? Is the gap sufficient enough, and consistent enough, to warrant action?

Now establish possible reasons for the gap in achievement. There are three main reasons why jobholders can under-perform:

- ***Domestic circumstances.*** They may be in poor health or suffering some emotional instability, owing to family or personal problems.
- ***Poor management.*** The job has not been sufficiently explained. Planning has been poor. The job may have changed in ways that don't make sense to the jobholder. Resources may be lacking. Discipline may be slack. Physical conditions may make working to standard very difficult. You may be managing the job poorly – as may another manager.
- ***Lack of organisational 'fit'.*** The jobholder may be unhappy in the team, or the team unhappy with the jobholder. So-called 'personality clashes' may be getting in the way, or a sense of natural justice may be being abused.

Having established the gap and the reason for it, you must set out with the jobholder to work out a plan for closing the gap. Where are the opportunities for improvement? How might you be able to help? Think of this part of the interview as joint problem solving. Find a course of action that the jobholder can agree to. Only then can they behave differently, so they must decide what to do.

They may be able to make substantial improvements in stages. Explain that you will be available to help.

Record your agreement and don't forget to follow up on agreed action.

Delegation

Delegation is deliberately choosing to give somebody authority to do something you could do yourself. It is not just 'handing out work'. You give somebody a responsibility: the task to be performed; and you devolve authority: the power to make other decisions and to take action to carry out the responsibility. Successful delegation involves matching responsibility with authority. Anybody who manages will know how difficult this can be – as will any parent or carer.

Preparing for the interview: working out what to delegate

Review your own objectives. Now distinguish between the activities you can delegate and those for which you must take personal responsibility. Obvious candidates for delegation include:

- **routine tasks;**
- **time-consuming tasks – research, testing, administrative or coordinating activities;**
- **complete tasks that can be delegated as a block of work;**
- **communication tasks – letters, promotional material, telephone calls.**

Delegate tasks that might be tedious for you but prove a real challenge to somebody else. Do not delegate:

- **tasks completely beyond the skills and experience of the person concerned;**

- strategic, policy, confidential or security matters;
- tasks involving discipline over the person's peers.

Having decided what to delegate, ask these questions:

- What skills, experience, expertise and qualifications are necessary for the task?
- Whose skills profile best matches the need?
- What further training or support would be necessary?

Look for people's interest in work that they haven't already done, or have maybe shown some aptitude for in unusual circumstances (covering for somebody else, coping in a crisis). Look for abilities that are exercised elsewhere: in another part of their work, or perhaps outside work.

Holding the interview

As with other kinds of interview, you can structure the interview to give yourself the best possible chance of success.

- **Welcome.** Explain the purpose of the interview. Begin by making the request. 'I should like to discuss with you the possibility of delegating x.' Explain the task you are considering delegating, and why you have thought of the interviewee as the best person to do the task. Explain that their position is an open one: they should feel under no obligation until they have clearly understood the question you are asking.
- **Acquire.** Ask the jobholder to explore their understanding of the issue and how they might see themselves relating to it. Does it fit with other responsibilities that they currently carry? Can they see it as an opportunity to grow and develop new skills? Examine, too, the standards of performance. Are they appropriate or attainable? Would training be necessary?
- **Supply.** Explore with the jobholder the opportunities for taking on this new task. This is joint problem solving

again, looking at the new arrangement in terms of how it might work, how you might help and how the interviewee might make the work more their own.

- **Part.** Now make your request a formal one. Give timescales or deadlines, as well as conditions of satisfaction: standards or targets to be achieved, how you will monitor progress and check for success.

Make it clear to the delegate that they have four possible responses.

- They can accept the request and make a commitment. 'I promise that I will do *x* by time *y*.'
- They can decline. They must be free to say 'No', while at the same time being clear of the consequences of a refusal.
- They can decide to commit later. 'I'll get back to you by time *z*, when I will give you a definite response.'
- They can make a counter-offer. 'I'm not willing to do *x*; however, I can promise you that I will do *w* (or maybe part of *x*) by time *y*.'

The result of this interview should be a clear commitment by the delegate to action: to the task originally intended for delegation, to part of the task, to another task, or to refusal.

In accepting a newly delegated responsibility, the delegate must be clear about three limits on their action:

- **Objectives.** The broad objectives of the task, the specific targets, conditions of satisfaction and timescales should all be made explicit.
- **Policy.** 'Rules and regulations.' The manner in which the task is carried out must conform to any legal, contractual or policy guidelines under which the organisation operates.
- **Limits of authority.** This is critically important. The delegate must know clearly where their authority

extends and where it ends: what powers they have for hiring or using staff, their budgetary authority, the resources available to them, their access to information, their power to take decisions without referral.

Finally, you as the manager must give the delegate full confidence to do the task. Make it plain that you will:

- **give any support that you or they consider necessary;**
- **provide any training that may be needed;**
- **be available for consultation or advice;**
- **make the delegation public knowledge.**

Coaching

Coaching is improving performance. The aim of a coaching interview is to help the coachee think for themselves, fostering greater awareness and hence greater responsibility. Fostering awareness is the first stage of coaching and involves looking at:

- **what is going on;**
- **the goals;**
- **dynamics and relationships between the coachee and others;**
- **wider organisational issues;**
- **the coachee's own feelings; fears, emotions, desires, intuitions, capabilities.**

Fostering responsibility is the second stage of coaching and involves second-stage thinking: thinking about what to do. So at this stage, coaching encourages the coachee to think about:

- **ideas for action;**
- **opportunities for change or growth;**
- **deciding what to do and how to do it;**
- **taking action.**

The coach's role is to ask questions. Instructing will tend to generate a minimal response: the action carried out, but little more. Asking a question focuses attention, increases awareness and encourages the coachee to take responsibility. Asking questions also helps the coach. Instead of forging ahead with a sequence of orders, the coach can use questions to follow the coachee's train of thought, their interest or enthusiasm, their emotional reactions – and adapt the coaching accordingly.

The most effective questions are those that encourage the coachee to think for themselves. Questions that point up the coachee's ignorance or subservience are unhelpful. The best coaching questions are open, non-judgemental and *specific*. Use the 'W' questions: 'What? Where? When? Who? How many? How much?' Avoid 'Why?' and 'How?' They will tend to imply judgement, analysis or criticism: all of them forms of second-stage thinking. If necessary, 'Why?' can become 'What were the reasons for' and 'How?' might be better put as 'What were the steps that...?'

During second-stage thinking, the same kinds of questions can serve to focus on what the coachee will do next, how, when, where and so on.

The Ladder of Inference is a useful tool in this process. Walking the coachee down the ladder from beliefs or assumptions to specific observations will encourage a wider awareness; walking up the ladder through meanings, judgement and belief to action will strengthen motivation and a sense of responsibility for future actions.

Holding the interview

There are four parts to the coaching process. The WASP interview structure now takes on a new name, based around the word GROW:

- **Goal setting: for the session and for the coachee's development;**
- **Reality analysis: to explore the current situation for difficulties and opportunities;**

- *Options* for future courses of action;
- *What to do*: a ‘hard’ decision on action, *when* and by *whom*.

Goal setting

The initial task is to decide the purpose of the coaching: to establish your goal, both for the coaching session itself and for the performance issue being coached.

Think of the coachee’s goals as statements beginning ‘How to...’. Generate as many new ‘How to’ statements as you can from the original goal. This helps you to explore the coachee’s deeper values, their higher aspirations and longer-term ambitions.

Now categorise these numerous ‘How to’ statements. Some will be ‘end goals’; others will be ‘performance goals’, measurable levels of performance that may set you on the path to an end goal or prove that you’ve achieved it. All of them are revealing: but you will only be able to choose one or two for immediate coaching. The best goals to choose, for practical purposes, are those that generate the greatest creative tension between goal and reality. Like the tension in a taut elastic band that stores potential energy, it is creative tension that will provide the energy for movement. Which goals excite the coachee most? Which generate the most commitment?

Reality checking

Creative tension depends as much on a clear perception of reality as on a clear goal. Look reality coolly in the face. Be objective; avoid judgement. Instead of describing past performance, for example, as ‘bad’ or ‘inadequate’, focus on the specific aspects of it that need improvement. Walk the coachee down the Ladder of Inference and offer verifiable, measurable observations:

- ‘What have you tried so far?’
- ‘What were the results?’
- ‘Exactly how much under target did you come in?’

- **‘What resources do you lack?’**
- **‘When did you last check the situation?’**
- **‘Where were the actual difficulties?’**

Remember that a good deal of current reality is inner reality. Follow where the coachee’s concerns take you and (gently) investigate their emotional responses.

- **‘How did you feel when you tried...?’**
- **‘What emotions arise when you talk about...?’**
- **‘Is there anything you’re afraid of?’**
- **‘How do you think you might be preventing yourself from achieving more?’**

Options for action

This is potentially the most creative part of the coaching process. Your purpose here is to find as many options for action as possible, in order to choose specific, realistic ‘next steps’.

‘The opponent within one’s own head’ can be a powerful censor:

- **‘It can’t be done.’**
- **‘We can’t do it like that.’**
- **‘They would never agree to it.’**
- **‘It will be too expensive.’**
- **‘Altogether too risky/disruptive/complicated/radical.’**
- **‘I don’t have the time.’**
- **‘That’s already been tried – and look what happened.’**

You might counter these objections with ‘What if’ questions:

- **‘What if we could do it?’**
- **‘What if this barrier didn’t exist?’**
- **‘What if we could get them to agree?’**
- **‘What if we found a budget?’**
- **‘What if we managed the risk/minimised disruption/made it simpler...?’**

- **‘What if we reallocated resources?’**
- **‘What if we tried again?’**

Keep your options open:

- ‘What else could you do?’**
- ‘Could you do it differently?’**
- ‘Are there other ways of meeting this target or goal?’**

Carefully examine the costs and benefits of the action; list its positive, negative and interesting aspects. Don’t limit yourselves to one option: perhaps you can merge two or more as a realistic course of action, or schedule options as immediate and longer term.

What to do

This part of the coaching process is about drawing up a detailed action plan:

- **‘What are you going to do?’**
- **‘When will you do it?’**
- **‘Will this action (or series of actions) move you towards your goal?’**
- **‘What barriers might you have to overcome?’**
- **‘Who else will be involved?’**
- **‘What support do you need? Where will you find it?’**
- **‘What other consequences are there of this course of action, and how do we deal with them?’**

And it is vital for the coach to ask a final question:

- **‘What can I do to help?’**

It is a good idea to document the agreed action plan, and even sign it, to confirm that the coachee is committed to carrying it through. Build in a review date to monitor progress.

Counselling

Counselling, like coaching, helps someone to help themselves. Unlike coaching, you are not helping to develop a skill, but rather helping to resolve a situation that the person sees as a problem.

Counselling is not giving advice. As a counsellor, your role is to provide a different perspective from which to try out ideas. The counselled person (I suppose we must call them the 'counsee!') must find their own solution and exercise their own responsibility. Neither the counsellor nor the counsee knows the answer at the start of the counselling interview. The answer emerges from the interview itself.

Counselling always relies on the assumption that the counsee has the skills, knowledge and – deep down – the desire to find a solution. It also assumes that these skills and qualities are impeded in some way. The impediment may be no more than the belief that the counsee doesn't know what to do.

The skills of counselling

The skills of counselling are not unlike the skills you use every day when people tell you about their problems. The difference is that you must behave professionally; in other words, honestly, consistently, and without prejudice. Your contribution should be well informed and appropriate to the situation.

Counselling, more than any other managerial interview, demands deep listening skills. Indeed, you may be required to do nothing but listen. Beyond the essential skill of listening, there are two main skills that come to the fore in counselling:

- **reflecting;**
- **confronting.**

Used well, they will all help to make the interview more productive.

Reflecting

Counsellors use reflection in three main ways. They reflect:

- **what people seem to be feeling;**
- **their words, the content of what they have said;**
- **the implied content.**

These are such vital tools of counselling that it is worth looking at each of them separately.

Reflecting feelings This is probably the most useful, and the technique likely to be used first in a counselling session. It always clarifies the issue being discussed and it helps the speaker to know that the listener really does understand. Frequently it needs to be no more than a few words:

- **‘You feel angry.’**
- **‘You seem to be distracted.’**
- **‘Perhaps you are confused.’**

Reflecting the speaker’s words This is a very simple and effective technique, enabling you to prompt the counsellee without running the risk of the discussion ‘going off track’. Early in a session, it can ‘open up issues’; at other times it can help to break through a ‘block’. The counsellor listens carefully for emotionally charged words, those given undue emphasis, or for which the speaker’s voice fades or becomes barely audible. Simply repeating those words can have magical effects.

Reflecting content The trick here is simply to repeat what the counsellee has just told you: ‘You say that you are not being challenged enough.’ It usually results in an elaboration of the point that has been made and provides a way forward. Perhaps the counsellee can’t quite bring themselves to say it, but they will talk volubly on the subject if you legitimise it for them.

Confronting

Use this technique with great care. It may consist simply of asking for concrete detail to support an allegation or an expression of vague feeling. It may involve pointing out apparent contradictions: between what the counsellor is saying and what they said earlier; between what they are saying and the way they are saying it; between words and body language. Remember that you are confronting perceptions in order to root out possible new ones. You are not confronting to criticise or to degrade the counsellor in any way.

Holding the interview

The four stages of counselling are very like those of coaching. The main difference between them is a matter of emphasis. Coaching is about reaching a goal and improving in some way; counselling is essentially about removing some obstacle or difficulty and simply being able to move on.

Welcome

You need to establish at the outset a positive relationship between counsellor and counsellor. The counsellor will almost certainly be feeling vulnerable and anything you can do to put them at their ease – to create the trust and respect that they need – is essential. Ask ‘What is the problem?’ (as the counsellor sees it), ‘Where is the “blockage”?’

Acquire

Some aspect of this problem is probably ‘buried’: either because the counsellor is unwilling to bring it to the surface (for fear of the consequences) or because they are not aware of it. Help them to step back and examine the possibilities of the situation by asking questions such as:

- ‘Why do you think you feel this way?’
- ‘What kind of response do you think you might get if you told X about this?’

- **‘Who else has contributed to the problem?’**
- **‘How do you think this has arisen?’**
- **‘What might be the cause of the problem?’**

You might consider making the interview more creative at this stage by asking the counsellor to think about the problem in radically different ways:

- **‘What does this problem look like?’**
- **‘If you were the problem, how would you feel?’**
- **‘Can you think of another way of expressing the problem?’**

In some situations, you may be able to help the counsellor to transform the problem in some radical way. They probably see the problem as a burden that they must bear, or an obstacle that they must overcome. A key stage in taking ownership of the problem is to see it instead as a goal for which they can take responsibility.

Invite the counsellor to try to frame the problem as a ‘How to’ statement. The idea is that by doing so the problem becomes expressed as an objective: a way forward that the counsellor might want to take. A ‘How to’ statement also implies multiple possibilities of movement: if you are asking ‘how to’ achieve a goal, the mind immediately responds with ‘well, you might... or you might...’ and so on.

Turning an obstacle into a goal is at the very heart of the counselling process. You must use all your skill and sensitivity to manage this most crucial part of the process. A counsellor may all too easily feel pressure at this point to take ownership of a problem when they have no desire to do so.

Supply

Now you must supply some possible courses of action and consider their consequences. The counsellor should be moving from emotion to a more considered attitude without any pressure

from you. They should be visualising various results and how they would feel about them. They should be feeling more enabled to choose a course of action.

Part

At this last stage of the counselling interview, you are not making a request – beyond the simple request that the counsellee makes a decision. Now that they can see their situation more clearly and have assessed various options, they need to make a move. It might be a very small one; it might be the beginnings of a planned strategy. (Many of my own more stressful problems seem to dissolve in the face of a clear plan.)

If you have helped someone to make a clear plan that they are motivated to act on, then your counselling has succeeded. You can also use this stage of the interview to help the counsellee reflect on the skills, knowledge, experience and personal qualities that are likely to help them through.